



Since its conception, Lake Charleston has offered a serene destination for picnickers, fishermen, sunbathers, and boaters from all over Coles County. Parking is available at the crest of a ridge overlooking the dam that separates the man-made lake from the Embarras River. A rectangular monument sits near this small parking lot, a monument that is seldom read by visitors to the lake who have come for its scenery, not its history. But the granite stone stands as both a memorial and a warning.

The rushing waters, even at their lowest point,

create a powerful undertow that has claimed four lives since the 1980s. Though their names are sometimes read, their stories are only known by those who lived through the traumatic ordeals.

Each of the names on this plaque represents an individual who lost his life enjoying the lake just as thousands of others have over the years. These are their stories.

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon in late May, 1981. Charleston resident Sean Eric Wickham and his friend Ronnie Johnson had been fishing off of their small boat on the eastern side of the lake. According to the Times-Courier, their boat capsized around 5 p.m. in a strong current, and the two decided to swim to their truck, which was parked on the spillway. When Ronnie Johnson reached the shore, he turned around and realized that his friend was no longer behind him.

Various teams, including a party of divers, searched the remaining



hours of Saturday and Sunday for Wickham until his body was finally found washed up along the Embarras River channel, about a hundred yards from the spillway. He was buried in Mound Cemetery. Sean Wickham was twenty years old, he had been a varsity football player at Charleston High School, and was the recipient of several sporting awards.



It would be a little more than a decade before tragedy would strike at the dam for a second time. Around 5 p.m. on April 17, 1992, John Bauer, a 20 year old student at Eastern Illinois University and a few of his friends were enjoying the lake on inflatable, one-person lifeboats. According to witnesses, Bauer floated close to the dam, looked over the edge, and then slid down the concrete incline. Bauer appeared to have made it safely beyond the dangerous current, but when he placed his paddle in the water he was sucked back towards the dam and became trapped in the hydraulic current.

Witnesses were stunned when, after a short struggle, Bauer jumped into the water in an apparent effort to swim to shore. The police arrived shortly after the young man disappeared under the waves. According to the Times-Courier, officers from the Illinois Conservation department searched the lake for over an hour, and finally located Bauer's body at 8:10 p.m. in the same area that Sean Eric Wickham had been found almost eleven years before.

In early May of 1996, the Embarras River was swollen from recent rains, and the pool at the bottom of the spillway was eight to ten feet deep.

Timothy J Fix and his friend Joseph A Bee were both students at Eastern Illinois University and both

members of the EIU wrestling team. On May 9, Timothy and his friends had slid down the concrete ledge, but they couldn't get back up. Joseph and another young man dove into the water to help them, but neither Timothy nor Joseph were able to get out of the water. The two were sucked into the unusually deep waters. Joseph Bee's body was found the next day, but heavy rains prevented searchers from finding Fix until May 14th.

City and university officials planned on creating programs designed to educate new EIU students about the dangers of the Lake Charleston spillway, but time has eroded the concern. However, these tragic stories should serve as a warning none of us should ever forget.

